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ABSTRACT

The only workable generalization regarding curriculum development in a heterogeneous, multicultural society is one that allows conflicting views to operate within an institution and that prepares youth for functional membership in the society. A review of the history of Western education from Sparta through the Puritans, William McGuffey, and Andrew Carnegie, reveals a mythical consensus about what is good and valuable and about a close bond between educational goals and societal goals. Although the present generation promises an idealized consensus between educational endeavors and the needs of society, those needs are not so easily and narrowly defined, posing problems for the curriculum designer in such areas as language instruction, literature, and the modes, models, and materials for curriculum construction in general. (AEA)

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THE NEEDS OF SOCIETY:

MANY VOICES - MANY ROOMS

Paul C. Slayton, Jr.

When the rhetoric is sliced away; when all diatribes from the left, the right and the center of the ideological spectrum are pared to essences, the schooling arm of a society has historically had as its elemental charge the task of preparing youth to be functional members of the society: Functional as workers, functional as citizens and functional as units within the corporate body. This is true of the United States in this eighth decade of the Twentieth Century, as it was true in the decade of the publication of the Cardinal Principles of Education, as it was in Herbert Spencer's England, as it was in the City States of the Golden Age of Greece, and as it was among stone-age tribes of gatherers and hunters.

The informal language arts curriculum of the primitive society, consanguinely administered, served to develop proficiencies in the native tongue, familiarity with the songs and stories of the tribe, ability to manipulate the symbol system of the culture and, concomitantly, to foster the internalization of the value system inherent within the language, the literature and the graphic mode. In essence, these are the charges of our somewhat enlarged tribe to contemporary English curriculum makers.

This thesis that the essential objectives of education, including those objectives related specifically to language learning, are univeral to all socities could be concluded with a summary statement to the effect that we need only search the past for particularly successful historical models of efficient educational endeavors, emulate those models and thereby pave the way for a golden age in English language learning.

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The history of education abounds with descriptions of societies which possessed amazingly efficient instructional programs. For example, Good's A History of Western Education points up the efficiency of the education of Spartan youth during the fourth and fifth centuries, B. C.

The elements of the rigidly structured Spartan society consisted of the elite Spartan soldier-citizen class; the subservient farmers, the Perioeci, whose role it was to support the soldier-citizens; and the state slaves, Helots, who served to perform the menial chores. Changes in the material aspects of life were minimal. The Spartan citizen never encountered any social or technological "Future Shock". The population was stable and, the war-like propensities of the Spartans notwithstanding, territorial aggrandisement was never an objective.

The Spartan citizen was prepared from birth for his role in society; males for the role of the soldier-citizen, and females for the role of wife-mother-nurse to soldiers. The Spartan infant obviously not physically or mentally fitted for the definition of the "good" life was exposed on the slopes of wild Mount Tagayos. At age 7 the surviving physically able Spartan youth entered into barrack life and the school of the soldier, beginning an educational regimen that made the term "Spartan" a synonym for austerity, harshness and discipline.

The only possible mobility within the Spartan social scheme was downward for the youth who did not meet the standards of quality deemed requisite for the soldier-citizen. A failure or a drop-out was, post-haste, demoted to non-citizenship status as a farmer or slave.

No softness or indecision, and little controversy afflicted Sparta. The concept of the good, the true and the beneficial pervaded every segment of the society. Laconic speech patterns, martial songs and tales of military heroics and sacrifice were the literary heritage of this society in which the highest service was to suffer in silence and to sacrifice oneself for the good of the state. No false views were countenanced; therefore, truth, Spartan truth, prevailed.

This society remained strong and eminently successful in acculturing generation after generation into an unchanging society. Spartan society did not grow old and die in accord with the Gibbons hypothesis. As did its greatest hero, Leonidas, Sparta perished as it had lived, by the sword. Athens, with its more loosely structured educational and social institutions, could adjust and, in time, absorb its conquerors. Sparta, ever rigid, with dogmatically defined values and objectives was unable to bend with the winds of change. Consequently Sparta perished. Twenty-five hundred years later Athens is alive and the heritage flowing from its ancient culture is revered throughout the world. Spartan legacies include only dusty hillsides and a few stories of adamant heroes and their sacrificial heroics.

At its zenith Spartan education exemplified a near-perfect educational model, if perfection is defined as a system closely attuned to the goals of the society. The products of that educational system were in perfect harmony with the needs of the society. Indeed, Plato used the Spartan "curriculum" and value system as the model for educating citizens of his utopian society in which governors would only govern, soldiers would only fight and farmers would only farm.

There are models of educational systems closer at hand which sought and seek to attain perfect harmony between an educational model and a social system.

Our Puritan forebearers, substituting theologian-kings for philosopher kings, succeeded in building a singularly successful homogeneous society.

The Puritans, too, knew the good life and had mapped the highways to achieving it. The strictures of manners and morals were preached by the theologian-rulers. The "satan-deluder acts" defined "minimal competencies" for the youth. To assure that no false views should confuse the citizenry promulgators of falsehood, the Ann Hutchinsons and the Roger Williams were banished from the colony. Without a Mount Tagayos at hand, Rhode Island had to serve. Plato surely smiled down from Olympus upon his inheritors in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

William McGuffey, the professor-author, was no slouch either when it came to illuminating the goals of a society. Surely, McGuffey was a far more potent influence on Nineteenth Century American manners and morals than were the political and religious leaders of his day (Mehl, p. 24). His "eclectic" readers with their Horatio Alger didacticism mirrored well, indeed, the Protestant ethic of his era and sought to promulgate that value system even more directly than they attempted to teach the skill of reading. The omnipresence of McGuffey's readers in American schools during the Nineteenth Century contributed to the myth of an American consensus on the good and the valuable and of a close bond between educational goals and societal goals. During this period, at least according to my grandfather, there were no failures, no dropouts, no social promotion, and praise be to McGuffey, everybody learned to read.

Without disrespect to my grandfather, I would suggest that this judgment was based on (1) a very small sample and (2) a - shall we say - "good ole days" memory.

McGuffey, too, had an able ally; that eminent financier-philosopher Andrew Carnegie. His "Gospel of Wealth" reinterpreted the American dream in Darwinian terms. Truly, the pot-of-gold was to be found at the end of the American rainbow. The rainbow, however, was visible only to those who had talent and the self-discipline for hard work. Carnegie, however, was less than explicit as to what was to happen to those who were for any reason lacking in either of these criteria. One must assume that his Tagayos was poverty. Still, it was hard to fit a peasant class into the American dream. And had we not just fought a great internecine war to break the shackles of the slave?

In our own generation we have with us the promise, if not the reality, of an idealized consensus between educational endeavors and the needs of society. Though we be lacking Plato's philosopher-king we have been provided a vision of the leadership of a psychologist-crown prince who is to lead us to the best of all possible worlds, Walden II. In this Skinnerian utopia, society's needs would be the only determinant of a curriculum which would be designed to systematically program each of us to fill, joyously fill, if you will, the particular vocational and social role into which we had individually been cast by a beneficent and knowing leadership.

Thus, models abound of highly successful educational enterprises. The criterion for such success is self-evident: When the society speaks with a single voice enunciating a consensus doctrinal position, it is child's play to attune the educational plan toward the enunciated goals. A single voice in a single room is readily understood.

We, however, live and work in a society consisting of many voices, emanating from many rooms. While the good life in our multi-cultural society lacks definition, it surely does not lack definitions. Therein lies the problem, and therein arises the difficulties for the curriculum maker.

Just as did Spartan society, our society directs the language arts curriculum maker to provide the experiences necessary to prepare you for proficiency in the native tongue. The native tongue of 8000 Spartans, bound intimately by geography, family ties and other facts of consanguinity, was subject to ready definition and identification. Behavioral objectives were self-evident and every facet of society served to teach and/or reinforce the common aims.

William McGuffey, Andrew Carnegie and their contemporaries viewed our native tongue just as clearly. And what they saw was the language of the Boston publishing houses. All foreign languages were to be eradicated and all dialect differences from the Bostonian were foreign. "Americanization" and "The Melting Pot" were the catch-phrases.

Today we see less clearly than our esteemed predecessors. We are a poly-glot society, made up of elements gathered from all over the world. We came and we come seeking to share in a future, a promise. And this somewhat amorphous "promise" is our only factor of homogeneity. Our past and our present are not held in common. And we are not to be homogenized and amalgamized. And we brought our roots with us. And we intend to keep them. The freedom of the American promise is the freedom to differ.

Thus, Curriculum Maker, where is THE native tongue? What is the proper dialect? Where are the common values coded within a universe of "native" tongues and dialects. You, Curriculum Maker, find a societal consensus for bi-lingual, or tri-lingual, or quadra-lingual instruction. Or for any of these prefixes hung upon the word "dialect."

The literature of a culture also carries within itself the coded value structure of the culture. Thus, a relatively homogeneous culture need not concern itself with identifying and clarifying values. The values of such a culture are as intrinsic to the corporate body as skin is to the individual body. In our Gutenberg (nee Multi-Media) mega-culture, the more experienced the individual, the more he is bombarded with the dichotomies of conflicting value systems. The censor has little work in the homogeneous society; all of us become censorious under the siege of ambiguities emanating from the conflicting currents of a multi-cultural literary heritage.

Come, Curriculum Maker, identify the literary heritage, the common past of American Society!

Look not, Curriculum Maker, to the publishing houses for curricular decisions. While they foster pluralism, they do so in a negative sort of way by avoiding divisive and controversial matters. Surely, a textbook can neither be too liberal nor too conservative. The publishers, therefore, seek to please everyone by offending absolutely no one. When a Publisher has deviated from his pattern, for example, the Responding Series, it has gotten its corporate nose bloodied. Therefore, reliance on textbook approaches to curriculum making is quicksand. The curriculum-maker-teacher will surely sink into the morass even if our students avoid it by the simple expedient of ignoring it.

Curriculum Maker, look to the society only for the base generalizations relative to the desired product of the educational process. You will find no solid aid from that source to give direction in selecting specific modes of instruction and materials for curriculum construction. The modes, models and materials can come only from the professional educator who knows the discipline being fostered, who understands the particular group of youth being prepared as functional members of the cooperate body and who recognizes that our society is characterized by its dichotomies and its ambiguities.

The only workable curricular generalization for this heterogeneous society is one that allows conflicting views to operate within an institution. The one common value to be assiduously sought is that one set of values must not seek to subdue other sets of values.

The charge to education in this society is, as the charge has been to all socities, to prepare youth for functional membership in the cooperate body. In this poly-cultural society, one which disavows all

of Plato's injunctions for the good education in the good society, one which seeks to educate, not merely train, all the children of all the people, one composed of a rainbow of cultures, differing languages and dialects and possessing a plethora of literary roots, the realization of the general societal charge is still possible. The realization, however, can become probable only if the schools can cease to be propaganda instruments for any segment of the society, even a majority segment, if such exists. In the absence of readily agreed upon definitions of the good, the true and the beautiful, the school curriculum in our time and in our age must engage with youth, not in revelation, but in a search for values and a search for the fulfillment of the American promise.